

POLICY BRIEF

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# MAKING FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY A REALITY:

Experiences and Lessons Learned from one of  
Sweden's Largest Women's Rights Organisations

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# INTRODUCTION

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This policy brief outlines our main recommendations for countries pursuing a FFP approach, based on these experiences. We hope to provide hands-on “do’s and don’ts” for Foreign Ministries and Governments in how to implement, organise, incentivise and measure the progress of Feminist Foreign Policies and Feminist Development Policies.

Sweden was the first country in the world to declare a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in 2014. Since then, the FFP agenda has grown in terms of countries officially aligned with FFP principles. It has also grown in terms of policy development and debate, academic research, and advocacy efforts from civil society and other stakeholders to develop and improve the agenda.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has had a unique role in relation to Sweden’s Feminist Foreign Policy. We have supported the development and implementation of Sweden’s Feminist Foreign Policy through over a decade of advocacy and policy dialogue. As an organisation with an extensive partner network in conflict-affected countries, we have acted as a bridge between women peace-builders, women’s rights activists, and the Swedish government and other governments and international institutions. We have also been a consistent watchdog, strengthening accountability by applying pressure through the media and advocacy, as well as contributing to evaluations and reports together with other civil society organisations on the progress of the FFP.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Game Changer <https://concord.se/rapporter/the-game-changer> (2023); Feminist Policies for Climate Justice (2020) <https://concord.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/fem-rapport-2020-final.pdf>; Civil Society Declaration for a Feminist Foreign Policy (2018) <https://concord.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/eng-sammanf-fem-deklaration-2018.pdf>; How Feminist is Sweden’s Foreign Policy? (2017) <https://concord.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/eng-summary-how-feminist-swedens-foreign-policy-2017.pdf>

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# OPERATIONALISING A FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY: POLICY FRAMEWORK, INTERNAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT, TARGETS & BENCHMARKS

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Colleagues and peers from civil society as well as academia have written extensively on the core principles and conceptual development of FFP, and dimensions and perspectives in relation to thematic priorities.<sup>2</sup> Here we wish to focus on tools and steps needed to make those principles a reality.



## Policy Framework:

### The Elevator Pitch

Sweden introduced a framework of implementing the FFP through the “three ‘R’s” – rights, recourses and representation.” Though not a comprehensive action plan, this was a readily-communicated way of structuring the work around key concepts that can easily be exemplified and made concrete. This kind of communication is important for any country declaring a FFP, to signal priorities towards all relevant stakeholders, both internal and external

(including civil society as well as media, political opposition and other governments).

### Clear Ambitions

It is important that those responsible for outlining the policy frameworks of the FFP establish a clear ambition for the policy, so that everyone inside and outside of the government understands why a Feminist Foreign Policy is needed and what the increased level of ambition means concretely. It must also be clear what the policy aims to achieve and what the added value and benefits of the new policy is. Buy-in amongst staff and government officials is essential in order for the policy to succeed.

It is also important to be clear on what political areas are assumed to be included in a Feminist Foreign Policy. In some countries the focus has been on development policy, in other countries the focus has been on diplomacy. If the policy is supposed to cover all areas of foreign policy including – for example – international trade, arms-trade, and migration, it is important to ensure that there is political will to align all these policies to feminist principles.

### Action plans within clearly defined thematic areas

When operationalising the policy framework, specific action plans within clearly defined thematic areas should be developed. These can then serve as hands-on guides regarding what to prioritise, for use by embassies, for example. Embassies and other entities that are to implement the FFP can see the different areas as a menu to choose from, prioritising different policy areas depending on the context, existing partnerships and relationships and resources.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/>; <https://www.icrw.org/publications/feminist-foreign-policy-a-framework/>; <https://www.ffpcollaborative.org>

These action plans could be organised independently from the FFP “label”, for example as action plans on SRHR, on support to Women Human Rights Defenders, or on women’s economic rights. This is a way of securing the durability of the content in the action plans, regardless of the overall FFP position. To further anchor these plans in long-term policy commitments, they should refer to existing regional and international frameworks and commitments as much as possible.

### **Link Action Plans and Policy Framework to both internal and external monitoring**

In order for policy frameworks and action plans to be operationalised, they should be linked with tools for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning. This increases clarity for staff on how to operationalise goals for the FFP. The systematic monitoring of progress allows for resources and efforts to be directed where best needed, and learning and evaluation contributes to building up a library of best practices and tools that can be shared internally and with other practitioners. The monitoring and documenting of progress is also important in order to prove the viability of the policy. If this is not done, the value and effectiveness of the policy is likely to be questioned both by government officials and by the political opposition.



## **Internal capacity development:**

### **Human Resources, Capacity Development and Learning**

It is essential to resource the organisation in accordance with the new policy and ensure that enough human resources are available to do a good job. For example, in Sweden an ambassador

responsible for coordinating the Feminist Foreign Policy was appointed, who together with a number of staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was tasked to ensure that the policy was implemented throughout the organisation. It is also important to carry out internal activities aimed at learning and developing capacity within the field of gender equality and women’s rights in all departments. This should include training staff on principles and practices for how to be good interlocutors with civil society.

In the short term this contributes to mainstreaming the FFP as both a priority and a responsibility across the organisation, in addition to establishing common ground on key concepts, and fostering an environment of learning. In the longer-term capacity development and learning can help guarantee commitment from staff over government changes.

Trainings and learning activities also foster closer and better relations between government officials and external experts on gender equality and women’s rights.

### **Performance scoring**

Depending on organisational culture, progress on FFP related outcomes should be included in staff performance reviews. This serves both as a signal from leadership that this is a top priority, and as a way of clarifying and concretising the expectations on staff.

Performance review systems should include indicators relating to external as well as internal progress, including participation in capacity development trainings, progress on achieving gender parity, and progress on outcomes defined in thematic action plans.

### **Sufficient resources for internal support and follow-up**

It is vital that internal structures are set up to support staff in implementing the FFP. Resources and capacity are needed to communicate clearly what the policy entails, give ongoing support to the framing of different activities, to ensure consistency across different processes, and to support policy development by thematic experts.

### **Strive for gender parity – walk the talk**

The representation dimension of a FFP cannot only be an external goal, it has to go hand-in-hand with internal goals to reach gender parity.



## Targets and benchmarks:

### Creating a baseline – what needs to change?

For progress created by a FFP to be meaningful, an honest analysis of what is not currently sufficient must be undertaken. It is important to properly resource this work, and invest in a proper baseline analysis of what is not feminist.

### Gender markers

Using international and regional frameworks, set up specific and time-sensitive goals for how the gender equality work will be strengthened. These should be integrated with the thematic action plans outlined above.

Gender equality policy markers 1 and 2 as defined by OECD-DAC should serve as a fundament for this. Efforts should be made to increase the share of aid fulfilling not just marker 1 (gender equality being mainstreamed in the project or programme) but also marker 2 (gender equality is the main objective of the project/programme and is fundamental to its design and expected results). Specific efforts should be made to increase gender equality programming in sectors that are currently the most gender blind.

### Benchmarks for funding

Although the share of aid having gender equality as a mainstreamed objective has increased in the last years, the funding of women's rights work is chronically underfunded. Despite strong women's movements being a key factor to achieving greater gender equality, only 0.13% of ODA reaches women's rights organisations, according to numbers from AWID.<sup>3</sup>

That too little funding reaches women's rights organisations in the Global South is a systemic problem and all feminist foreign policies must address this. Ambitious benchmarks for increased funding for women's organisations, as well as actions on how such funding can be as qualitative as possible, should be a top priority for every FFP. Efforts should also be directed at improving systems for tracking and reporting this funding, including the possible development of additional OECD-DAC gender equality policy markers.

### Benchmarks for civil society dialogue

Civil society's and specifically feminist and women's organisations' function should not only be as recipients of funding, but also as policy experts, dialogue partners, and watchdogs. Civil society is in many contexts the most important arena for women's political participation, since they face discrimination and exclusion from official political processes. In order to make sure that civil society dialogue is prioritised and integrated into all relevant processes, policy frameworks and action plans should include benchmarks or indicators for the number of consultations that are had with civil society, both on capital-level and through embassies. This naturally needs to go hand-in-hand with efforts to make such consultations meaningful and not tick-the-box, and also hand-in-hand with ongoing informal dialogue and partnership with civil society outside of formal consultation sessions. But what is measured is what is valued, and a quantitative goal also enables civil society to keep track and hold the government accountable.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/where-money-feminist-organising-new-analysis-finds-answer-alarmin>

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# OVERARCHING PERSPECTIVES

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In addition to the tools and actions suggested above on how to organise internal structures, we are also suggesting some overarching perspectives that in our experience are crucial to ensure that an FFP can deliver.

## **Intersectional approach**

An intersectional approach recognises that different systems of oppression and discrimination are interdependent and overlap, based on identities such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, et cetera. Thus, an FFP with an intersectional approach does not only include gender categories in its analysis of when, for example, Rights, Resources and Representation efforts are needed. With a context specific analysis of intertwined structures that causes inequality, policy interventions seeking to reduce such inequality is more likely to succeed.

## **Transformative approach**

By definition, a Feminist Foreign Policy challenges the status quo of 'traditional' foreign policy discourse. New categories, perspectives, and priorities are brought to the table. While these can be included in a foreign policy without the label "feminist", the name does itself represent an ambition to question existing power structures, and to bring a diversity of voices to decision-making arenas.

## **Human Rights-Based Approach**

Feminist Foreign Policies and human rights-based approaches share common principles of non-discrimination, equality and inclusion, and can be complementary and reinforcing frameworks. A human rights-based approach seeks to analyse inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress and often result in groups of people being left behind.<sup>4</sup>

## **Dialogue with civil society**

A feminist approach to foreign policy should be based on consistent and meaningful dialogue with women's rights organisations, including from the Global South. This should be implemented by regular consultations both on women's rights issues specifically, and on all areas where the issues affect women and girls. There should also be clear standards for the agendas of all missions, delegations and country visits, that none should be carried out without meeting with local women civil society organisations.

Create robust structures for dialogue with and feedback, as civil society organisations, specifically women's rights, feminist and LGBTI organisations, are crucial sources of information, knowledge and experience to make any feminist policy successful. Their role in implementing a Feminist Foreign Policy, as experts and as watchdogs, must be secured with clear and transparent processes. For successful implementation, capacity development efforts on how to conduct qualitative dialogue and consultations

<sup>4</sup> <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>

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# KEYS TO MAKING FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICIES DURABLE AND SUSTAINABLE:

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- **Cross-party consolidation and parliamentary support.**

In Sweden the lack of cross-party support meant that the Feminist Foreign Policy was dropped after eight years, when a new government was elected in 2022. To avoid that Feminist Foreign Policies are abandoned with changes in government, it is important to think strategically about how it is launched and presented. Too close alignment with a singular political party and/or politicians should be avoided. Broad buy-in and ownership from parliament can be encouraged with joint goals for the policy where also parliament plays a part, and with robust systems for monitoring and reporting back to parliament, to increase parliamentarians awareness of the benefits of the policy.



- **Present clear and concrete results.**

This can be both quantitative results in forms of numbers and figures, and qualitative results in form of examples and stories from successful activities and projects.

- **Clearly define a level of ambition that is ambitious but doable.**

To prevent getting stuck in debates on hypocrisy or policy incoherence, the framework for a FFP should be transparent about what is achievable and not, and about what the challenges and hinders are to an all-encompassing FFP.

- **Invest in public awareness.**

Beyond informing and reporting to parliament and political oppositions, investments should also be made in making the general public aware of what the FFP means beyond its label. In this work, national organisations working on gender equality and women's rights can be important allies.

- **Separate action plans from the label.**

In organising policy frameworks and action plans for the FFP, these should be separate entities not necessarily requiring an overarching FFP to be implemented. That way, singular action plans on important issues can continue to be valid also with government changes should the FFP label be dropped, if the issue itself is still prioritised.

- **Be mindful of the FFP becoming too person-driven.**

While strong political leadership is crucial for successful implementation, this must be complemented with strong mechanisms to broaden ownership of the FFP, both in parliament, government and within foreign ministries.

- **International Co-operation**

Countries with Feminist Foreign Policies should invest in collaborations to strengthen joint commitments in multilateral fora, as well as separate networks where members states can exchange best practises and learnings on implementation. Countries that have adopted FFPs should also encourage arenas where other countries can join to be inspired, co-sign joint statements, and be brought closer to their own adoption of a FFP.

**The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is the largest organisation in Sweden working on women's rights globally. Since 1993, we have worked directly in areas affected by war and conflict to strengthen the influence and power of all women. Today we work closely together with around 140 partner organisations in 20 conflict-affected countries to defend women's rights, achieve gender equality and justice, and reach lasting feminist peace.**





**FOR ALL WOMEN'S RIGHTS**  
IN EVERY CORNER OF THE WORLD

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